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TAGS: IR PHUM PINR PGOV

SUBJECT: JEWS IN IRAN OKAY, BUT HAMPERED BY GLASS CEILING

REF: DUBAI 0336

CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to an Iranian Jewish couple, the situation of Jews in Iran is pretty good, as long as they remain apolitical. They are allowed to worship freely. The main drawback of being an Iranian Jew is the inability to move up in jobs with the Iranian government. End Summary.

Iranian Jews Doing Okay

¶2. (C) In mid-October and mid-December, Conoff spoke with an Iranian Jewish couple from Esfahan-Eliyas Harounian and Sionit Shamashian. She is a physician, while he is an engineer with the National Iran Oil Company (NIOC) where he has worked for more than 30 years. Much of both discussions focused on the current situation of Jews in Iran. In addition, they discussed the current situation in NIOC and the Oil Ministry and also gas smuggling.

¶3. (C) Both told Conoff that the situation for Jews in Iran is good. They enjoy relative freedom and do not suffer outright persecution from government authorities or other Iranians. They specifically mentioned that as long as Jews remain apolitical and are good, law-abiding citizens authorities do not harass them. Once they become politically active and participate in activities that bring them to the attention of the government, however, they have problems.

Religious Practice Not Impeded

¶4. (C) Jews in Iran are also allowed to worship relatively freely. Harounian and his wife specifically commented that the Iranian government had recently given money to repair one of the main synagogues in Tehran. During the meeting on December 21, Harounian unfortunately revealed that since his last discussion with Conoff someone had recently vandalized their synagogue in Esfahan. In mid-November, someone threw a bottle through one of the synagogue's windows. Harounian inferred that he believed this incident was a fairly random act, and gave no indication that he felt it was carried out by Iranian government forces.

Glass Ceiling Hinders Rise of Jews in Government Jobs

¶5. (C) Like other religious minorities in Iran (Reftel), the key problem Harounian and Shamashian see for Iranian Jews is the lack of opportunity for upward mobility in government jobs. Harounian has worked for NIOC for more than 30 years and commented that his "students"--those employees he has trained during his time with the company--are now his bosses because they are Shia Muslims. He claimed that if he were Shia Muslim he would have been oil minister or head of NIOC many years ago. He

admitted to Conoff that he was preparing to retire from NIOC in the next few months. He has already been offered a new job with a French company upon his retirement. Sadly, he revealed that his superiors made it clear to him that he, a Jew, would not be permitted to accept such an offer.

No Increase in Persecution Under Ahmadinejad

¶6. (C) During the meeting on 21 December, Harounian further commented that to date Jews have not experienced increased persecution since Ahmadinejad took office in August. In addition, he stated that persecution has not increased in the wake of Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel and holocaust denial comments since October 26. Comment: It remains unclear if persecution of Jews in Iran will increase if Ahmadinejad continues to spout anti-Semitic rhetoric. Harounian did not believe it would, but felt that anything was possible in Iran's current economic and social climate. End Comment.

Comment

¶11. (C) Comment: It is unclear how many Iranian Jews apply for visas to visit the US. Aside from not getting permission to join a French company after retirement from NIOC, Harounian did not indicate that Jews experienced difficulties getting passports to leaving Iran. Religious affiliation is not asked on the visa application. It is also not asked as part of the standard interview questions, but may come up during the course of the interview. Since arriving at Post in mid-August 2004, Conoff has only interviewed two Iranian couples that identified themselves as Jews. Responses from other posts in countries neighboring Iran reveal similar numbers who have identified themselves as being Iranian Jews. End Comment.

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